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TAGS: PREL YM MU

SUBJECT: A/S FELTMAN WITH OMANI FM - YEMEN

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard Schmierer, Ambassador, Department of State, Embassy Muscat; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Discussions about Yemen during a February 17 meeting between Omani Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs Yusef bin Alawi (YbA) and NEA Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman revealed that the U.S. and Oman are on the same page regarding both internal politics and external influences. YbA believed that al Qaida was the key threat; and he emphasized that there was no alternative to President Saleh. He explained that although Yemeni tribes historically venture right up to the brink of disaster, they usually pull back before going over the precipice, meaning the Houthi struggle was likely to be contained. YbA thought that Saleh would need strong international engagement to do the right thing, particularly in regard to al Qaida. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The one and a half hour meeting, which also focused on Middle East Peace and Iran (septels), was attended by DCM Victor Hurtado, poloff (notetaker), Staff Assistant Jason Ullner, Omani MFA Secretary General Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busa'idi, and Omani notetakers. (Note: It is unusual for Sayyid Badr to attend a meeting with YbA. End Note.)

¶3. (C) AL QAIDA AND EXTREMISM: YbA expressed concern about al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), although he did not believe it was independently powerful, instead remaining dependent on the tribes for its support. He did not think that Saleh was trying to build relationships with the tribes to counter AQAP. The issue with the Houthis was manageable, he added, noting that historically, the tribes regularly push themselves to the edge, but usually settle to avoid the worst outcomes. He noted that the Houthis wanted the Salafists out, adding that while religion was "feeding the whole thing," the struggle was not really about faith, but political power.

¶4. (C) INTERNAL POLITICS: YbA said that a few months ago, Saleh was paralyzed by his increasingly small inner circle. The "young boys" had taken over all the security matters and effectively tied the President's hands. He thought that Saleh had regained some of that power recently, at least in part because of Saudi support. He speculated that both the Bakil and Hashid tribes had their eye on the presidency, but that Saleh was outmaneuvering them, "using democracy as an umbrella to play games." YbA said that there were no viable alternatives to Saleh; without him there "would be civil war."

¶5. (C) INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE: YbA suggested that President Saleh needed to be strongly encouraged to re-engage his old group of advisors and reduce the power given to the security forces. A concrete suggestion would be to involve his son in politics, and not just security. He emphasized that Saleh would need the cover of international pressure to push his inner circle to combat AQAP as a priority. The message should emphasize that he will need to do so in order to be accepted in the region.

¶6. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Feltman.
Schmierer